

power of freedom is unstoppable. I believe it because I believe in an Almighty that has given every man, woman, and child on the face of the Earth freedom. And I know freedom yields the peace we want. If America maintains our confidence in our ideals, is willing to take the lead, freedom will once again prevail. And we'll be able to look at a generation of Americans coming up and say, "We did our duty; we defended America and laid the foundation of peace for generations to come."

We can also be confident, in every generation, freedom has found brave defenders in the men and women of our Armed Forces. You know, through the years, I've received a lot of heartfelt letters from our military families. One of them was from a woman in Texas named Sue Stoner. Sue's husband is a decorated Air Force veteran of Vietnam and the Gulf war. Last year during a trip to Fort Hood, the couple witnessed their 6-year-old granddaughter Mikayla do something that every American should do as well. The little girl bounded over to a wounded stranger in Army fatigues and said, "I just wanted to say thank you for serving our country." As Mikayla's proud grandmother tells it, the soldier leaned forward on his walker and said, "Sweetheart, I did it for you."

Every one of you put on the uniform for the same reason. You risked your life, you sacrificed so Americans like Mikayla could grow up in freedom. We will always honor your service. We will never forget your sacrifice.

This is the last time I will address a veterans convention as the Commander in Chief. Over the past 70 years—7½ years, I've been honored to get to know many of your members. I've relied on your counsel. I have benefited from your wisdom. I have been extremely grateful for your prayers.

I know you share with me a deep love for America and an awesome pride in those who defend her. When I meet with our troops, they always inspire me with their sense of duty and honor. They are America's finest citizens. I am confident that our troops will always be able to count on the fellowship and the support and the love of the men and women of the VFW. May God bless you, and may God bless America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:46 a.m. at the Orange County Convention Center. In his remarks, he referred to former Senator Bob Dole and former Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna E. Shalala, Cochair, President's Commission on Care for America's Returning Wounded Warriors.

### **Remarks on Gulf Coast Reconstruction in New Orleans, Louisiana**

*August 20, 2008*

Thank you all. Thank you for the warm welcome. Please be seated. Thanks for the warm welcome. General, thank you for the kind introduction. Who would have thought that 3 years after the storm, the President can come and say, New Orleans, Louisiana, is on its way back as a stronger and better city.

I'm proud to be here at Jackson Barracks, built by my predecessor, President Andrew Jackson. *[Laughter]* He built it to protect the city of New Orleans. And that's exactly what the folks housed in this facility have done and will continue to do. So first, I want to pay homage to the Louisiana National Guard. I thank you for what you did during the rescue efforts. Even though your own homes were destroyed, you went out to save people and their homes. And the people of Louisiana—*[applause]*.

I think the message here today is: Hope is being restored; hope is coming back. I'm going to spend some time here in New Orleans, and then I'm heading over to Gulfport, Mississippi—same message. And I'm, frankly, not surprised. I'm not surprised that hope is marching in, because I understand the nature of the people who live here in this community and these communities. I have seen people when their spirits were at a low ebb, but never did they give up. And now, I've seen incredible progress is being made.

Oh, there's still work to be done. This isn't, like, a farewell address—you know, George Bush came and he said he's through. No, we're—there's still more work to be done. But I do think it's important to take stock of the moment and to remind people how far this community has come.

Laura Bush sends her best. She's spent a lot of time down here, and so have I. The librarians in this part of the world are especially grateful; after all, the Laura Bush Foundation has helped refurbish a lot of school libraries up and down the gulf coast. She sends her very best. I know she would say what I'm about to say: It's amazing to come into a crowd like this, and look around and see so many familiar faces, people that we have come to admire, and frankly, after all this business is over, people that we'll say are our friends. Maybe it's because of the tragedy that struck that we formed a close bond; I don't know. But I can tell you that we have made a lot of good friends in the gulf coast region. And even though I'm headed for retirement in about 6 months, that's not to say I'm going to forget who my friends are in this part of the world.

I do want to thank the Governor for joining us, Governor Bobby Jindal. He's a—[*applause*]. It should not surprise you that on the helicopter ride here, Jindal had a few agenda items. [*Laughter*] That's what Presidents have come to expect. And I appreciate the way he laid them out in logical form with a—in a very respectful tone.

I'm also proud to be here with the mayor of this great city. The mayor and I have had some quality time. [*Laughter*] We have come to know each other. I remember when I first flew down here, there was the mayor at the end of the steps of Air Force One. I said, "How you doing, Mayor?" He said, "I'm hungry, and I haven't had a bath." I said to the steward on Air Force One, "Fix the man up with a meal, and turn on the hot water in the shower."

And I appreciate you, Mayor. I appreciate the fact that you decided to run for office again. You said to the people of this part of the world, "There is unfinished business, and I intend to be a part of the finished business." And the people listened, and they put you back in office. And I'm proud to be with you, Ray. Thanks for coming.

We've got a lot of people from the delegations, the Federal delegations. William Jefferson is with us. Congressman, I'm proud you're here. Thank you for coming.

The one thing you learn when you're in this part of the world is you better pay atten-

tion to the parish presidents. [*Laughter*] Right, Ray? You are one. But so is Aaron Broussard, of Jefferson Parish. I'm proud to see you, Aaron. I'll never forget my first time when we came to see you. We were in, like, a community center or something. And I think you were in Bermuda shorts. [*Laughter*] Or they may have been spandex shorts. [*Laughter*] But nevertheless, you were focused; you were intense; and you got the job done for the people of your parish. I really appreciate you coming.

Billy Nungesser of Plaquemines Parish is here. Billy, thanks for working hard. The Governor says that Billy says, "We're through with the recovery. We're moving on. There's still projects to be done, but Plaquemines Parish is heading into the future with confidence."

I'm proud to be here with the parish president from St. Bernard's Parish, Craig Taffaro. Craig, I'm honored you're here. He's the first to admit he's got his hands full. But I want to thank you for your leadership, and thank you for agreeing to take on the issues and the problems. You could have easily have ducked the responsibility that comes with elected office. It would have been much easier to say, "We'll just let somebody deal with the next 4 years; I think I'll show up later on." But you came in and you've taken the lead, and we appreciate it.

I want—proud to be here with General Landreneau. General, it's good to see you again. Thank you for your time. I said thanks to Hunt Downer; that would be General Downer. I appreciate—[*applause*].

Don Powell was the first man down here to work with the local officials to try to make sure this recovery was coordinated, that the money was well spent, that the money was focused in the proper direction. He did a fine job. He decided he wanted to go back to the promised land; that would be the State of Texas. [*Laughter*] And so, I asked General Doug O'Dell to take his place. He's a tough-nosed, no-nonsense guy who cares deeply about the people down here. General, thanks for coming. I'm proud you're here.

So, the next two men I'm going to introduce are people that you came to know well, and people I came to know well too; people I admire a lot. First, the Commandant of the

United States Coast Guard, Admiral Thad Allen. And the man who came up with a new phrase in American lexicon, which was: “Don’t stay stuck on stupid”—General Russ Honore; thank you. U.S. Army, retired—what’s it like? [*Laughter*] Yes.

At the airport, I had the honor of saying hello to the Saints quarterback, Drew Brees, and running back Deuce McAllister. By the way, as you may know, Laura and I were at the Olympics. No finer citizen of the United States and of this part of the world than Chris Paul of the Hornets.

And thank you all for coming. I appreciate you being here a lot. It’s hard to believe that it was 3 years ago that Katrina, in essence, wiped out a lot of this city. I mean, just flooded it and just destroyed a lot of hopes and a lot of dreams. Eight hundred thousand people across the gulf coast area left their homes; that’s a lot. Eight hundred thousand people figured out how to leave, and headed into—all across America. Never before has our Nation seen such destruction by nature, never before. And a lot of folks, I’m confident, wondered whether or not there would be a brighter tomorrow.

In the midst of all the flood water, people were saying, “Oh man, can we possibly have a good future here?” And yet, the good future is here. I’m—not to be a “told you so,” but I was in Jackson Square, and I predicted that New Orleans would come back as a stronger and better city. That’s the prediction I made. I also pledged that we’d help. And \$126 billion later, 3 years after the storm, we’ve helped deliver \$126 billion of U.S. taxpayers’ money. [*Applause*] And I thank you for applauding on that statement, but I know you’re applauding the American taxpayer. A lot of people around the country care deeply about the people down here. And so it was—you know, it was money that we were happy to spend.

The money is mainly in the hands of State and local governments, helping to rebuild. And there’s a lot of work to be done; I fully understand that. And as Bobby made clear and the mayor made clear, there’s some ongoing projects that they want to make sure the Federal Government pays attention to—and we will. I make no promises; this isn’t a chance for me to come and try to be a

typical politician and make you a promise I don’t intend to keep. I hope by now people understand that when I say something, we’re going to get it done, but I am judicious about saying things. And so, I told Bobby and told the mayor, we’re open-minded, and we’ll listen very carefully to make sure that this recovery continues on.

There are people hurting—I fully understand that—people waiting to get back in their home, wondering whether a brighter day is possible. Yet, a brighter day is coming. And I want to talk about some of the hopeful progress that’s being made. I think it’s important for our citizens around the country to understand, there is hopeful progress here. We see hopeful signs in the work to protect New Orleans from future storms. The Army Corps of Engineer [Engineers]<sup>\*</sup> has repaired 220 miles of levees. That’s important. You cannot rebuild these communities unless you’re confident that the levee system will work in the future. The corps is upgrading the flood walls so they’re stronger than before Katrina.

We’re on track to meet our goal of a 100-year flood plain protection by the year 2011. I know there were some doubts about whether or not the corps would be able to get the job done. I can remember clearly, on one of my visits—maybe it was the year after the storm—people say, “Oh yeah, sure, he’s just saying this, and they don’t intend to do it.” Well, we intended to do it, and the corps is working hard.

Governor Jindal requested that Louisiana be allowed to pay the State’s share of the levee improvement costs over 30 years, instead of 3. I listened very carefully to what—[*applause*]. I listened very carefully to what he had to say. I didn’t think Louisiana ought to choose between rebuilding flood walls and completing other projects that are vital to recovery, so I granted the Governor’s request. [*Applause*]

Thank you. This is not supposed to be self-congratulatory. [*Laughter*] I’m congratulating you.

There is hopeful signs of progress as housing is restored. Louisiana’s Road Home program has put nearly \$7 billion into the hands

<sup>\*</sup> White House correction.

of more than 115,000 homeowners. Federal dollars are increasing affordable housing throughout New Orleans. And as we rebuild, the strategy is not to repeat the mistakes of the past, but to move toward a vibrant mixed-income neighborhood system. Each week, hundreds of families are moving out of their temporary housing, and they're heading into permanent, long-term structures. And that's hopeful. Do more people need to move out? Absolutely. But has progress been made? Absolutely.

We see hopeful signs of progress in the growth of the economy. New Orleans sales tax revenues are at nearly 90 percent of their pre-storm levels. Think about that. Three years after the devastating storm, sales tax are at 90 percent of where they were prior to the storm. Employment increased by 8,000 jobs last year. The Port of New Orleans is a bustling center of commerce and trade; Louisiana exports now exceed pre-Katrina levels.

The present city's tourism industry is on the rebound. The mayor was telling me tourism is back. People are coming here with confidence that they're going to have a good experience. That's the reason why we had the North Americans' Leaders' summit here; I wanted the President of Mexico and the Prime Minister of Canada to get a flavor, a taste of what New Orleans is all about. And they did.

The health care system is improving. The Department of Health and Human Services has provided more than \$2.6 billion to care for the poor and uninsured, to offer mental health services, and to support primary care clinics and hospitals. The Federal Government is helping to recruit doctors and nurses and other health care professionals. We want to make sure the people of New Orleans have the care that is necessary for this population to grow. And we're working with the Governor to build a system of community-based clinics that encourages good preventative care and eases the strain on the city's emergency rooms.

There's hopeful progress when it comes to reducing crime. No question about it, there needs to be a lot of effort, Chief, and I know you're working hard to reduce crime. It's essential that folks get after the crime

problem here in New Orleans. Everybody knows that. And we want to help. There is a role for the Federal Government to help the local police force deal with crime. And so there's—Federal funds are given to local police and sheriffs, essential equipment like cars, computers, and radios. Agents—Federal agents are working the streets alongside the New Orleans police. Federal resources are helping the police department rebuild its crime lab and resolve its forensics backlog.

Violent crime is a problem. But I was told, over the last 6 months, there is notable improvements. My only point to the people of New Orleans is we'll continue to help you solve your crime problem.

We're seeing hopeful signs of progress when it comes to education in New Orleans. More than 80 public schools in the city have reopened. That's good; that's really good. You can't have a vibrant city unless you got your schools up and running. About half now are charter schools, to give greater access to—give parents better options. High schools that once struggled are being transformed into career-oriented academies. In other words, there's a lot of innovation here in New Orleans. Rather than repeat mistakes of the past, people said, "Let's come together and let's innovate. Let's make this school system—" [*applause*].

I find it interesting that Teach for America is focused on New Orleans; that they're recruiting a lot of really bright kids from around the country to come here and help the youngsters of this part of the world achieve educational excellence. By the way, because of accountability measures that have been put in place, I'm able to report to the people in Louisiana and around the country that test scores across this city have improved significantly.

More restaurants are now open in New Orleans than before the storm. Isn't that interesting? [*Laughter*] You can get some good food here too. As I mentioned, I saw the Saints football stars; they're now going to start a new season in a refurbished Super Dome.

Religious institutions are opening up. Places of worship that were closed are now opening their doors. Musicians are returning

this season to Mahalia Jackson Theatre. Earlier this year, New Orleans celebrated the return of another sweet sound, the streetcars on St. Charles Avenue. This city is coming back.

As we think about the future, it's important to remember some of the great acts of compassion that took place. I think about the folks who came from across the country here to volunteer—14 million hours. Isn't that amazing? Brothers and sisters in need, and total strangers came to say, "What can I do to help you?"

I think about the citizens across the country who donated \$3.5 billion to total strangers to help. I think about the people here in Jackson Barracks that went out of their way to serve. And I think about all the citizens we've met, and I'm just going to cite three, but they're extraordinary examples of what took place.

First, Daryn Dobson. See, he was studying at Stanford Business School. Like, what would be a natural thing, being at Stanford Business School, is stay out there in Silicon Valley and try to be a part of the high-tech boom, the next wave of technology. That would have been very tempting for—but he felt the need to come back to New Orleans to help—or come to New Orleans to help. And so, he joined what's called the Idea Village. It's a program to support the city's entrepreneurs and to help stimulate economic growth. It's an incubator for good ideas. This bright man decided, instead of trying to seek his own personal wealth, to come here and help people realize the blessings of entrepreneurship, all aiming to add value and to create jobs here in New Orleans.

I appreciate so very much, Daryn, the briefings that you gave me and Laura. And I appreciate the fact that you're back here in New Orleans, serving. Thanks for coming.

Okay. Then there's Leah Chase. Some of you might have heard of Dooky Chase. Dooky Chase, for those people listening, is a New Orleans institution. It's been around for several decades, as has Leah. *[Laughter]* The flood waters left her restaurant completely ruined. She saw her whole life washed away, and she wasn't sure where she was going to find the strength to go on. And she found that strength, though, in her faith, in

her family, and her friends and neighbors. The community held fundraisers here in New Orleans to help her rebuild. I found it interesting that high school students from all over the country came to help her rebuild. I found it amazing that friends in Indiana donated new chairs for a dining room. And I'm here to testify the food is awesome. *[Laughter]*

And finally, Doris Hicks. She is the principal of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Charter School of Science and Technology of the Lower Ninth Ward. We had a chance to visit her school. After Katrina, the flooding at MLK was so bad that they found fish on the second floor of the high school. That's high water. She was told she couldn't open until 2010. Somebody said, "We're pessimistic." I guess they didn't understand her spirit. They said, "You won't be open until 2010." But she didn't appreciate that. She said that this community needed this school up and running. It's open today. I'm told families are moving into the community so they can return to that school, and she puts it, "There's no other place like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and there's no other place like New Orleans." Well, first of all, there's not many—*[applause]*—and there is no other place like New Orleans and its surrounding parishes.

This is an important part of our country. This is a part of our country that was flat on its back and is now standing up and headed for the future. I have been so honored to work with you. As I told you, I'm sprinting to the finish, and so I'm not through, but I thought around this third anniversary of a tragic event, it makes sense to come by and say, here's what's happened; here's where you're headed. It's an awesome example of courage and determination, desire, and I am here to honor you all.

I appreciate the citizens of New Orleans and the citizens of south Louisiana showing what is possible in the face of unspeakable tragedy. I thank you for staying with it. I thank you for allowing me to come by and see you once again. May God bless you, and may God continue to bless our country.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:20 p.m. at Jackson Barracks. In his remarks, he referred to Maj. Gen. Huntington "Hunt" B. Downer, Jr., Assistant Adjutant General, Louisiana National Guard,

who introduced the President; Mayor C. Ray Nagin of New Orleans, LA; Billy Nungesser, president, Plaquemines Parish; Maj. Gen. Bennet C. Landreneau, Adjutant General, Louisiana National Guard; former Federal Coordinator for Gulf Coast Region Recovery and Rebuilding Donald E. Powell; Maj. Gen. Douglas V. O'Dell, Jr., USMC (Ret.), in his capacity as Federal Coordinator, Office of Gulf Coast Rebuilding; Chris Paul, point guard, New Orleans Hornets; President Felipe de Jesus Calderon Hinojosa of Mexico; Prime Minister Stephen Harper of Canada; and Warren J. Riley, superintendent, New Orleans Police Department.

### **Statement on the Death of Representative Stephanie Tubbs Jones**

*August 20, 2008*

Laura and I are saddened by the death of Chairwoman Stephanie Tubbs Jones.

As a proud lifelong resident of Ohio's 11th District, she devoted her career to serving her community at both the State and national levels. She was an effective legislator who was dedicated to helping small businesses, improving local schools, expanding job opportunities for Ohioans, and ensuring that more of them have access to healthcare. After making history as the first African American woman elected to Congress from Ohio, the Congresswoman worked to expand the rights of all Americans. Our Nation is grateful for her service.

Our thoughts and prayers are with her son Mervyn Leroy Jones II and the rest of her family.

### **Remarks Following a Dinner With Elected Officials and Community Leaders in Gulfport, Mississippi**

*August 20, 2008*

**The President.** Governor, thank you for coming.

**Governor Haley Barbour of Mississippi.** Thank you, sir.

**The President.** I thank the United States Senators—Senator Wicker, Senator Cochran—Congressman Taylor, mayors, supervisors—county supervisors, small-business owners, high school teacher. Thank you all

very much for giving me a chance to come and visit with you.

I have brought—you know, a member of my administration, United States Marine General—retired—O'Dell is here to listen to people. We still understand there are issues, but I do want to say something about the progress. I remember what it looked like right after the storm. I remember what it looked like in the first anniversary right after the storm. I remember what it looked like last year, Governor. And things have improved a lot.

Are there still people wondering about their future? Absolutely. Do they still have other issues to deal with, like cleaning out some of the bureaucracy so that the housing issue can get solved quicker? Absolutely. But things are better here on the gulf coast of Mississippi.

And one reason they're better is because you've had strong leadership, and the other reason—at the State and local level. And the other reason is because people refused to give in to the storm. People picked up their lives and decided that this is where their home was going to be and made something out of these communities.

I remember going to the schools right after the storm hit and seeing the determination of the teachers and principals about how—whether they had to be in a trailer or in a old building, they were going to teach these kids. And the spirit of southern Mississippi is real, and it's alive. And the leaders here around the table know better than me what I'm talking about.

So, I appreciate you giving me a chance to come. I told people that I'm almost through, but I'm sprinting to the finish. This is not the farewell dinner. *[Laughter]* But this is an opportunity to come and listen to what's on people's minds, with the idea of continuing to work with the elected officials to solve problems and make sure this is even better 6 months from now than it is today.

At any rate, I want to thank you. Food's good here too. *[Laughter]* I appreciate your time, Governor. Thank you.

**Governor Barbour.** Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 6:28 p.m. at Vrazel's Fine Food. In his remarks, he referred to Sen. Roger F. Wicker of Mississippi; and Maj.